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Berdymukhamedov has reopened provincial hospitals and eliminated many restrictions on travel within Turkmenistan, where motorists traveling between cities once faced a gantlet of checkpoints.

He released 20 political prisoners in 2007, including the country's former chief mufti, imprisoned after he resisted Niyazov's order to display copies of the Rukhnama in every mosque. **The Commission on International Religious Freedom** cited Turkmenistan for its "systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedoms." Human Rights Watch called Turkmenistan "one of the most repressive countries in the world."

Government officials privately concede the country has a lot of progress to make. But they argue that, despite low wages and high unemployment, the people enjoy a relatively high standard of living, thanks to subsidies, price controls and free or nearly free utilities and gasoline.